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# CHRISTIAN UNION AFTER THE WAR

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So difficult is it to estimate the significance of the events in the midst of which one moves that it is impossible to write the history of one's own times. It is not while you are climbing its slopes that you best realize the size and sublimity of the Matterhorn. Yet, however we may be perplexed by the proximity and the urgency of the events of our day, we know that we are approaching the summit of one of the great peaks of history. Looking back over the long road over which the race has come, we can distinguish successive heights that it has climbed and dangers that it has surmounted. The path that leads to freedom and democracy is steep and rugged along its entire course. Our own Civil War, the revolutions of 1848, the Napoleonic struggles and the upheavals that preceded them, and the American Revolution are milestones in the modern age. The course of progress has been slowed at times, but it has never been arrested nor turned back by war. It will not be turned back now. We are rising, not descending.

The world cannot pass through such an ordeal as this of the Great War and remain the same. It is agreed that we are on the eve of profound changes in every realm of human thought and action. God is beginning to do some new thing among men, and the foundations of society are being removed that new foundations may be laid. "The mighty God, even the Lord, hath spoken, and

called the earth from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof." "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh!" As the convulsion that shakes the world today surpasses any that has preceded it, so the transformations that are to succeed it are to be more profound. The age presents such a challenge to thoughtful and earnest men as no generation has ever faced before. Many of the things that man has devised are to be removed, and the divine and eternal principles that rib the earth and that cannot be shaken will remain.

We are on the eve of changes of a revolutionary character in international politics. Who shall say how the world is to be made over? It is too soon to say, but it appears certain that civilization will never be re-established upon a permanent basis until there is provided some form of a League of Nations to Enforce Peace—until the nations come together in a United States of the World.

No man can doubt that out of the war are to come such transformations in the social and industrial world as the last fifty years of agitation have failed to produce. Democracy advances with giant strides. The rights of labor to a fair wage and an eight-hour day are being established in this country upon a foundation so firm that nothing that can transpire after the war can rock it. The principle of governmental control of any or all industries so far as the public good may require it has made such headway

that it is unlikely that it will ever be relinquished.

Among the institutions which are sure to suffer shock and change as a result of the transforming influence of war are those of religion. They are not immune to the contagion of new ideas. The Bourbon attitude that "forgets nothing and remembers nothing," the stand-pat attitude which resists all change and expends all its energy in clinging to the old landmarks, will prove to be perilous in such a day as this. "Anchorage to a submerged rock," says Sir Oliver Lodge, "is not safe amid rising waters." Unless the church is plastic, responsive to the molding influences of the new day, it will not serve the times that will shortly be upon us. When an irresistible force meets an immovable object—it takes a wiser head than mine to predict what will happen!

Already the effects of the war upon the consciousness of the people of America are of profound significance in their religious aspect. This rebirth of idealism, this spirit of self-sacrifice, this voluntary co-operation, this merging of conflicting interests in a common endeavor, are all of them fundamentally of a religious character. These are the impulses in which religion deals, these the motives that religion seeks to arouse. The necessity for frugality, self-control, self-sacrifice, voluntary subordination of individual desires to the common need, the reawakening of patriotism and a new sense of the privilege, and the cost of sharing in the heritage of freedom and democracy which is ours as a people, are sure to leave the nation other than they found it. There is a quickening of the national consciousness, a sense of na-

tional solidarity, an emphasis upon the things of the spirit, such as must profoundly affect the future.

And what shall we say of the effect of the war upon the men at the front? Some day they will come back, most of them we hope; but they will not return as they went. They left us boys, they will return mature men, disciplined, with a new self-respect and self-control, a new world-outlook, thinking new thoughts, cherishing new purposes. Into their hands is to come the control of this country and perhaps an important share of world-control. They will shape our political and industrial future. These are elements which we cannot yet estimate in any forecast of what the future will contain.

No one who has spent any time with these men in camp can doubt that they are unusually susceptible to religious impressions. Someone has said:

The prayers of a generation that young men would come to church have been answered in the million and a half who are "at the church's very altar-stairs, stairs which in this instance are architecturally a little crude, but none the less real because the stairway happens to be called Y.M.C.A. Hut."

What effect upon the life of the church are these men to have when they come home? They have been face to face with reality. Donald Hankey says:

I have seen with the eyes of God. I have seen the naked souls of men, stripped of circumstance. Rank and reputation, wealth and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, manners and uncouthness, these I saw not. I saw the naked souls of men. I saw who were slaves and who were free; who were beasts and who men; who were contemptible

and who honorable. I have seen with the eyes of God. I have seen the vanity of the temporal and the glory of the eternal. I have despised comfort and honored pain. I have understood the victory of the Cross.

Men who have seen thus clearly under the baptism of blood in the trenches will not be satisfied with less than reality for the future. Religion in the trenches is religion stripped bare of its accessories and trimmings. It has to do with the soul and God, God and the soul. It is a religion of experience rather than a religion of creed. It is worship, not liturgy. It seeks the heart of things and is indifferent to nonessentials. It is in no sense sectarian. I think that when these men come home they will think less of some of the things that lie on the periphery of religion and that form the occasion of religious differences, and will put their emphasis upon the common things of religious experience.

Since these deepest experiences of the religious life are the things that unite all Christians, while their intellectual conceptions divide them, there must inevitably result from the war a program for unity of Christian effort stronger and more consistent than any that we have achieved hitherto. That spirit of co-operation, which the Christian church has long been seeking in much difficulty and discouragement, is being achieved today in a superb degree by the forces that are devoting themselves to social and patriotic effort under the stimulus of the present crisis. In the work of the Red Cross men and women of all creeds are uniting. In loyalty legions and councils of defense men of all trades, financial ability, and social traditions are uniting hand and heart. Fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers whose

loved ones are at the front are bound together by bonds of sympathy stronger than any of the political or economic differences that would separate them. The Y.M.C.A. has demonstrated afresh, but in a more dramatic manner, the ability of all shades of religious belief to unite for action. On the battle front Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic vie in service one with another. The purpose to "win the war" has brought men to subordinate all differences by the unifying influence of a large and imperative task. On the Western Front the Allies of many nationalities fight under a single command and place their forces where they are most needed. All national rivalries are merged there in the single ambition to preserve the cause of liberty. Our soldiers, when they come back, will have come, as we believe, from a great task well done, achieved through the subordination of individuality, the merging of differences, the renunciation of selfish ambitions. They are sure to ask whether the churches cannot do as much. Is there not a patriotism of the Kingdom of God, a will to win in the cause of the gospel, stronger than any partisan or sectarian ambition? To win the world Christians must unite! The events of our day are persuading the churches and, if they will not be persuaded, will compel the churches to unite to conquer. This is the strategic hour for farsighted Christian statesmen, the opportunity for all unselfish Christian forces.

There is a [spiritual] tide in the affairs of  
men,

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life

Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

The church must begin to prepare now for the period of reconstruction that is to follow the war. "In time of peace," it used to be said, "prepare for war." This America, wisely or unwisely, signally failed to do. The church must not fail to obey the similar injunction, "In time of war prepare for peace." The President is calling upon all classes of our citizenship to make ready for the new era. Already social agencies are combining to conserve our national resources and make America strong. We are laying plans, for example, to save the lives of 100,000 babies this year, one-third of the number who die annually from preventable diseases. Statesmanship in the political and industrial field is eagerly forecasting the future and seeking to save the best results of these hours of toil and anguish for the uses of society. Where is the Christian statesmanship that will do the same for the church?

No one will question the urgent need of the unification of Christian effort for the winning of America and the world for Christ. The twin embarrassments of "overlooking" and "overlapping" meet us on every side. Individuals and entire communities are neglected because the spheres of the activities of the churches are not co-ordinated. The conscientious scruples of many against stepping upon each other's denominational toes cause them to hesitate to occupy fields of religious need, or to refrain from ministering to those upon whom other denominations have a presumptive claim, but who yet are not reached by any church. On the other hand, the tendency of all denominations to press into what they regard as "strategic" fields leads to neglect of the more sparsely settled communities in many sections of the country. With 143

denominational bodies in the country and a larger number of separate congregations with no denominational affiliation, it would seem as though every theological idiosyncrasy might find accommodation, yet the multiplication of forms of religion is a principle source of religious weakness.

The acuteness and the cost of the reduplication of Christian effort are best seen in rural communities and smaller villages, where churches are commonly multiplied beyond the need of the population or its ability to support them. If religion languishes in the countryside, to what cause shall we attribute it in a larger measure than to this excess of separate organizations, with the added cost of maintenance, the deterioration of ministerial service, and the spiritual menace of denominational rivalry that this involves? It is from such communities, let us remember, that most of our men now at the front have come. When they come back from these transforming experiences through which they are passing, with their larger outlook, the discipline attained through the subordination of individuality to the needs of a common task, and their new emphasis upon reality in religion, we cannot doubt that they will look with awakened eyes upon the scenes among which they have been reared. What satisfied them once will not satisfy them then. "Over there" they will have learned to work together. Whether we welcome or deplore it, we are upon the eve of an era of Christian co-operation that will revolutionize the methods of the past.

Already in multitudes of communities the difficulty of church maintenance and the aspiration for a closer Christian unity are finding expression in experiments in

church union of various forms. The movement is bound to grow. The question is no longer whether we are to countenance the community church, for we shall not be consulted; it is already here. The question is whether this movement is to be wisely directed and standardized, and whether our denominational polities are to be so adapted to the new needs that the community church can be recognized, welcomed, and utilized, tied to the denominational scheme, and drawn into the stream of Christian activity, or whether it is to develop in a nondescript, haphazard manner according to the good intentions and lack of experience of the particular community that enters upon it and be cut off from participation in the life of the church at large. Many of the community churches now being organized are initiated without consultation with the larger bodies or judicatories of the local churches immediately concerned, and without reference either to the rights or to the interests of the denominations affected. Some of them are left high and dry upon the sandbank of undenominationalism, like a fish out of water, and it is only a question of time as to how long any church can live outside the stream of religious beneficence and missionary activity. There should be concerted thought and action upon this pressing situation among the denominations that are concerned in it. The present disorderly manner of effecting consolidation of churches is bound to lead to disaster and loss. If we are not careful we shall find that another sect has arisen as a by-product of the effort to abolish sectarianism. It is a situation that demands immediate consideration on the part of

all evangelical denominations. At the Congress held at Pittsburgh in the autumn of 1917 by the Commission on Inter-Church Federations of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America a resolution was adopted which indicates how important this phase of Christian co-operation seemed to that representative gathering. It reads as follows:

This Congress rejoices in the rapid growth of community churches and believes that to new communities and to older towns and villages where the church life has declined this type of organization offers assurance of enlarged church membership, spiritual strength, and a new social vision. Each and every evangelical denomination is urged to encourage the organization of these churches and to adjust its policies so as to admit them into its fellowship with recognition of their character as designed to serve the spiritual interests of the whole community.

The difficulties in the way of closer co-operation and co-ordination among denominational bodies are various and great. Some of them are merely exasperating, other serious and excusable. There would appear to be little reason for some of the various bodies of Christians remaining apart. Similar in polity and doctrine, they might come together at once without loss or compromise. In the case of others, where differences of conviction are extreme, the obstacles in the way of union in effort are more formidable. There are historic hindrances, prejudices, and principles incorporated into the very texture of the church and hardly distinguishable now from the structure itself. Much must be forgotten and much remembered before the

prayer of the Master that his disciples might be one can be fulfilled. There are human obstinacy and indifference to the issue and sectarian ambitions that have little to be said for them, but which furnish perhaps the most formidable obstacles of all. Nevertheless the dream of Christian unity can be realized and will be realized when Christians desire it earnestly enough and are willing to pay the price.

Meanwhile this chaotic period of sporadic experiment in Christian unity, this period of adjustment in a transition age, presents serious problems of its own. We are in danger of losing the vigor and efficiency of the old régime in the process of passing to a new. Men are already beginning to say that "there will be no denominations after the war" and are excusing themselves on that fancied ground for religious indolence and indifference. Even if it were proved to be true that denominationalism as we have known it is passing away, it remains true that the great denominations are the only agencies that we have today for the accomplishment of Christian tasks. We need today a greater denominational loyalty than ever, together with a larger charity and deeper spirit of co-operation. How carefully the great steamship is warped along the dock, no rope cast off until another holds, until it is at length ready and headed for the open sea! A lack of loyalty to our great denominational enterprises in this transition period will imperil the cause of the Kingdom of God and leave us nothing to take with us, should the time ever come for the

organic unity of the church. As things are today, there is as much danger in radicalism which has no regard for the past as in extreme conservatism which worships it.

There is no immediate prospect of the passing of denominationalism. What the future may have in store for us in that respect it would be presumptuous to prophesy; but our immediate duty is, on the one hand, to save denominationalism from degenerating into sectarianism and, on the other, to prevent religious effort from falling into lethargy. Whatever closer forms of union may come in the future they will not hopefully be furthered by making light of conscientious differences of conviction now. There must be room enough in any new form of organization for men to carry their consciences with them when they enter it. The great need now is that Christian men shall find some way of working together in spite of their differences, and on a plane higher than their differences, at the great tasks of the kingdom. Denominationalism must not be abandoned but broadened. Nonessentials must be recognized and labeled and essentials emphasized. The note of reality must be sounded. Christians must learn to work together and to love one another and thus to understand one another. Only thus will the way be paved and the foundations laid for that great structure, which, like the mustard tree of the Kingdom, shall be capacious enough to include in a new unity the infinite variety of the whole range of Christian experience.